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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001450

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL; NSC
FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Cohabitation standoff continues, with no firm indication of whether snap elections are in the cards

Refs: Colombo 1441, and previous

(U) Classified by Long Lee, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons: 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: The cohabitation standoff between Sri Lanka's two major political parties continues. The PM reportedly met August 6 with former FM Kadirgamar, a close adviser to President Kumaratunga, in a bid to resolve the situation. A readout of that meeting was not available, but a presidential assistant indicated to us that Kumaratunga was looking for ways to avoid an all-out confrontation. There is still no firm word on whether snap elections are in the cards, but there is a growing feeling that they would be disruptive for the country. End Summary.

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Cohabitation Standoff continues
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2. (C) The cohabitation standoff between the two major parties continues. As foreshadowed in Reftel, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe reportedly met with former Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, a close adviser to President Kumaratunga, on August 6. A readout of that meeting was not available. Milinda Moragoda, a senior minister who is close to the PM, told us the following:

-- As far as he knew, the PM had delivered to Kadirgamar the ultimatum reviewed in Reftel, i.e., that the president had to agree to a constitutional amendment voiding her right to call parliamentary elections or face a snap election now. (Note: The president could call for new elections at any point one year after the last election, which took place in December 2001.)

-- The PM's United National Party (UNP) was serious in its resolve that the current cohabitation situation could not continue. Both sides were constantly bickering and that made it tough to govern the country. There had to be a resolution now.

-- Kadirgamar had almost certainly taken the PM's comments "aboard" and referred them back to the president for review. Moragoda said he planned to check with the PM on the situation and would keep us updated.

(Note: There are press reports that the Prime Minister plans to meet Kumaratunga one-on-one to discuss the situation at some point this week, perhaps as early as on the margins of the regular Wednesday cabinet meeting.)

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President's Aide takes Soft-line
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3. (C) Meanwhile, in potentially positive news, a contact in the Presidential Secretariat indicated to us that the president wanted to avoid an all-out confrontation. Harim Peiris, a presidential spokesman, told us that Kumaratunga did not see the need for snap elections. An election campaign at this time would only take away from efforts to deal with the country's many pressing issues, such as the peace process and the cost of living. The president was willing to work with the PM to ease tensions and was willing to compromise as necessary. She would not, however, agree to any effort aimed at undermining her powers, including her right to call elections. Polchief underscored that the U.S. continued to urge both sides to show restraint and maintain focus on key issues, such as the peace process. (Note: Peiris confirmed press reports that the president's office had requested time on TV on August 11. When asked, he said the president or one of her advisers would speak at that time. There was no plan to make any "dramatic announcements." The idea was

simply to explain the president's side of the story.)

Both Parties trade Barbs

14. (SBU) In public, both the PA and the UNP continue to exchange accusations. Sarath Amunugama, the PA's media spokesman, told the press August 6 that the UNP had no right to call elections on its own volition. Amunugama said only the president could dissolve the Parliament and call elections -- "He (the PM) can dissolve himself and he can dissolve the cabinet. That is within his ambit." (Note: There seems to be a lack of clarity in the Sri Lankan Constitution on whether or not the president needs to sign off on the calling of elections.) For its part, UNP representatives continued to make hay out of a memo, apparently drawn up by the PA, that outlined a plan to topple the PM and install a new government headed by Kadirgamar (see Reftel). (Note: In his August 6 press conference, Amunugama seemed to confirm that someone in the PA had indeed drafted the memo in question. PA sources had earlier strongly denied involvement.)

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Comment
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15. (C) With all of the political jockeying, there is still no firm word on whether snap elections are in the cards. There is a growing feeling that they would be disruptive for the country, however, and would not solve much in any case. Jehan Perera, a well-known local commentator, told us that he thought that elections would be "useless" because at the end of the day the president and the PM would still have to work together. In addition, the peace process would only suffer, as the two sides put all their efforts into an election campaign that was likely to be violent. That said, the real possibility remains that the two parties may choose snap polls as the only option. End Comment.

16. (U) Minimize considered. WILLS